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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: U.S. BEEF IMPORTS TO TAIWAN

¶1. Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies focused November 3 news coverage on Shim Nakagomi, former coach of the Brother Elephants baseball team, who was involved in the game fixing scandal in the Taiwan professional baseball league and who attempted to leave Taiwan on Monday but was detained by the National Immigration Agency at Taiwan's Taoyuan International Airport. Most newspapers also had extensive coverage on the Taiwan authorities' formal announcement to ease restrictions on the import of U.S. beef products. Newspapers were concerned about the safety of President Ma Ying-jeou, after a Fokker 50 VIP transport plane trailed smoke and sparks as it landed in Taichung with President Ma on board on Monday.

¶2. In terms of editorials and commentaries, editorials in the pro-independence "Liberty Times" and the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times," a sister newspaper of the "Liberty Times," had contradictory views about a signature drive launched by the Consumers' Foundation and other civic groups to hold a referendum that would require the government to renegotiate with the United States on the beef issue. The "Liberty Times" editorial urged the public to support the drive to launch a referendum in order to overturn the protocol signed between Taiwan and the United States. The "Taipei Times" editorial instead criticized the Consumers' Foundation as an organization which "over the years has launched consumer crusades of dubious priority and zero scientific rigor." The "Taipei Times" editorial said a referendum on beef is "the most absurd suggestion for a referendum topic to date." End summary.

A) "Using a Referendum to Deny the Ma Ying-jeou Administration's 'Compulsion' against the Whole People"

The pro-independence "Liberty Times" [circulation: 680,000] editorialized (11/3):

"... Why did [President] Ma Ying-jeou give up....during the negotiations with the United States [on the issue of beef] without receiving any substantial benefit from the United States? The explanation that he [President Ma] gave during an interview with a magazine may reflect what was on his mind. He said, 'many people were worried that we were leaning too heavily toward the mainland because we have improved relations with them. However, after opening [Taiwan's market] to [U.S.] beef, Taiwan could improve [its] relations with the United States. This further indicated that we have removed an important obstacle lying between Taiwan and the United States.' In order to demonstrate that [he] was not leaning toward China, he gave Taiwan's interests to the United States, rather than taking [interests for Taiwan from the United States]. If this 'equilibrium' is logical, does this equal an admission that he has been ladling out [Taiwan's resources] to China over the past year? However, the other side [of the Taiwan Strait] must have seen all this with its own eyes after [Taiwan] accorded these benefits to the United States. What will the 'Chief Executive of China's Taipei Special Administrative Region' give China in the next phase? Is [Ma] going to make a cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) a foregone conclusion following the precedent [of

U.S. beef] as well? Ma Ying-jeou caused Taiwan to fall into this plight as a result of being extorted by the two hegemonies. Won't the seven million voters who helped him win the presidency regret this?

"Indeed, it is too late to regret. It is useless to simply feel regret. At this point, in order to overrule the 'revisions to the regulations on the import of U.S. beef,' the most effective way is to propose a referendum and let people use direct civic rights to overturn the government's executive order. ..."

B) "A Plebiscite on a Petty Beef?"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (11/3):

"... Joining these disingenuous legislators, councilors and party hacks in their attacks on US beef are a number of interest groups whose contributions to the debate have been uninformed, unintelligent and even deceitful. The main offender is the Consumers' Foundation, which over the years has launched consumer crusades of dubious priority and zero scientific rigor.

"If this organization applied its ferocious strictness on US beef imports to all other health matters affecting consumers, it would extend its campaign to instituting bans on imports and local production of alcohol and tobacco, introduce bans on betel nuts, motor scooters, sports cars, meat with high levels of fat and night market food. This would just be the start. The fact that the Consumers' Foundation does not engage in such quixotic behavior points to opportunism and cynicism, not a sense of proportion or respect of the right consumers should enjoy to choose what they wish to consume.

"This week the debate has raised the specter of that tactical chestnut of the Chen Shui-bian presidency, the referendum, as a possible new front for opponents of US beef - as if prime rib and sirloin were a fit and proper subject for a plebiscite.

"This gratuitous use of the referendum - not as a gauge of popular opinion but as a threat to intimidate governments away from actions within their administrative mandate - is no less cynical and inept than the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) attempts to solve political problems through a mechanism that would override the legislature. ...

"The prospect of a national referendum on beef is about the most absurd suggestion for a referendum topic to date, although the DPP's suggestion that a referendum be held to assess whether a certain referendum topic be held comes a close second. This is a health issue, not a political issue, but the way that this situation is developing augurs the overriding of individual choice by interest groups with no health expertise, let alone an understanding of the US beef industry. ..."

STANTON